

Part One

THE NEW MERGER LANDSCAPE

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GOD IS DOING SOMETHING NEW

Biblical Basis for Mergers

It's definitely a new day for church mergers. According to Leadership Network research, 2 percent of US Protestant churches merge annually¹—that's six thousand congregations. More significantly, another 5 percent of churches say they have already talked about merging in the future²—that's fifteen thousand more. These churches—plus tens of thousands of others elsewhere around the globe—are sensing that they could fulfill their God-given mission better together than separately, and they're exploring new ways to join forces for the advancement of God's kingdom.

You may not use the word *merger*. You may call the idea a *restart*, *replant*, *partnership*, *adoption*, *collaboration*, *consolidation*, *satellite*, *unification*, *reunification*, or even something more indirect like *joining forces*, *repotting*,³ or *building a legacy*.⁴ Whatever label you use, the core idea is two or more churches becoming one—the combining, integrating, and unifying of people, structures, systems, and resources to achieve a common purpose: doing life and ministry together as a vibrant, healthy expression of Christ's body, the church.

However you describe them, mergers are happening with an increasing frequency. And unlike the results in previous generations, many church mergers today are producing positive growth and admirable fruit. Increasingly, they are becoming a vehicle for unifying local congregations around a shared mission that is producing more effective spiritual and social impact.

Eleven Merger Contexts

In addition, mergers are showing up in a wide variety of contexts, each situation offering a slightly different benefit. Here's our sense of the top contenders:

- As *long-established churches* merge, many enter a growth cycle marked by fresh vitality, new spiritual energy, intensified community engagement, and joyful momentum—and most important, an increase in newcomers, in decisions to follow Christ, and in baptisms.
- Other *long-established churches*, facing dim prospects about their future, are delighted to discover that a merger can translate their considerable heritage into a terrific foundation for a new or next generation.
- *New churches* that are growing and are in need of facilities are finding them through a merger with a congregation that has facilities with perhaps room to spare.
- Other *new churches* that are struggling can be merged into another church, or if there is a nearby parent church, merged back into the parent church, whether into its original campus or as a new multisite campus.
- *Churches that had formerly separated* are being reunified through mergers, having decided they can do more together than apart.
- There is a growing desire among church leaders to become more *racially and ethnically diverse*. Some are seeing mergers as a way of diversifying their church and becoming more *multiethnic*.
- *Multisite churches* report that they get one out of three of their campuses as another church merges with them and becomes one of its campuses.⁵
- *Mainline and denominational churches* are using a merger approach to assist nearby struggling congregations in their

faith family, nurturing them back to health and vitality, some as long-term relationships and some as only temporary adoptions.

- Among *megachurches* almost one out of five have experienced a merger, most through a smaller church joining a larger church, but sometimes even two large churches joining.⁶
- Some *megachurches* are developing national networks mostly composed of church mergers. These megachurches have an intentional strategy that encourages and facilitates church mergers.
- An increasing number of *churches of all sizes* are seeing mergers as a way of ensuring a smooth succession transition as their pastor retires.

Future chapters will provide examples from each of these contexts. Taken together, however, mergers encompass a wide spectrum of types of churches. The range of mergers includes strong, stable, stuck, and struggling churches. Many are motivated by survival, but an increasing number identify “mission” as their primary impetus.

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All mergers involve one church that we call the *lead church*—the church representing the dominant or primary culture that will continue through the merger—and one or more *joining churches*—whose congregations will be lifted or otherwise shaped to become more like the lead church. Sometimes the lead and joining churches are very similar in their look, feel, health, and approach to ministry, but more often there is some level of distance between them. Part of the merger process involves major transformation, sometimes on the level of a death, burial, and resurrection, for the joining church to grow into the identity of the lead church.

Is This God at Work?

In the pages ahead, we identify many logical reasons why church mergers make sense, why they are increasing, and why the results are increasingly positive. But those explanations are all secondary to our sense that God is clearly behind the momentum, especially in nations where Christianity has a long history and thus a need for revitalization of long-established churches whose life cycle is ebbing. In biblical terms, we believe mergers are another example of God doing a “new thing” (Isa. 43:19), helping existing congregations to reach new levels of unity, maturity, and the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13).

We believe this is congruent with God’s desire for “divine makeovers” as expressed through the prophet Isaiah, “Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings” (Isa. 58:12).

We affirm the idea of surfing spiritual waves that Rick Warren describes in *The Purpose Driven Church*. He points out that near the church he pastors in Southern California, people can learn a lot about surfing: how to choose the right equipment, how to use it properly, how to recognize a “surfable” wave, and how to catch a wave and ride it as long as possible. But they can’t learn how to build a wave. Just like surfing is the art of riding waves that God builds, “our job as church leaders . . . is to recognize a wave of God’s spirit and ride it. It is not our responsibility to *make* waves but to recognize how God is working in the world and join him in the endeavor,”⁷ Warren says.

We see the incoming waves of church mergers as offering a five-way win:

- *Struggling churches now win.* Stuck and struggling churches get a fresh start in living out God’s purpose for their church. As one of the participants in the Leadership Network 2011 survey of church mergers said, “Today, three years after our

merger, most of us have to stop and think which church someone was a former member of.”

- *Strong churches win.* Strong and stable churches gain momentum as stuck or struggling churches join them in a new chapter of life. A staff member from a church of two hundred that had a church of fifty merge with it said, “The number one reason we decided to join together was to reach our community faster and more effectively. In our opening month together we had twice as many first-time guests than the two churches had separately before the merger. Within the first two months, twelve people had made decisions for Christ. We are on the road to reaching our next two hundred. I am sure we have made mistakes, but God is at work, and that’s a huge win!”
- *The body of Christ wins.* The corporate witness of the local church is stronger and better able to make disciples of Jesus Christ. As one of the churches in the same Leadership Network survey said, “We are reaching more people who are farther from God than either church was doing before the merger.”
- *Local communities win.* Local communities are served better by strong vibrant congregations. Leaders of a church in the same Leadership Network survey that had experienced several mergers, all with positive outcomes to date, said, “If it is God’s plan, you can do no better. All leaders from the joining churches would agree that the mergers were the best thing that could have happened to our communities.”
- *The kingdom of God wins.* The kingdom of God advances and grows through vital, life-giving congregations. In one church during the first weeks after its merger, nine people were baptized. “That’s more than our church baptized in the last ten years,” the pastor told us. The new church also saw ten other members join in those same weeks.

Everybody wins in successful mergers. With testimonies like these (and we could cite many more), isn't the idea of mergers—by whatever term you use—something worth prayerfully and seriously exploring?

Biblical Basis for Mergers

Where do we find mergers in the Bible? The word isn't there but the concept is supported throughout Scripture. The Apostle Paul taught there is "one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Eph. 4:4–5). The Psalmist declared "how good and pleasant it is when God's people dwell together in unity!" (Ps. 133:1). The entire drama of the New Testament is the story of God bringing diverse groups together toward that divine reality.

Jesus talks of having "other sheep" (Gentiles) that need to be brought into the flock (John 10:16). He said that the temple should be a house of prayer for *all* nations, not just his own ethnic group (Mark 11:17). The Book of Acts demonstrates a wide variety of people groups that are all brought into one church to the point, as Paul explains later, that in Christ "there is no longer any distinction between Gentiles and Jews, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarians, savages, slaves, and free, but Christ is all, Christ is in all" (Col. 3:11, *Good News Translation*). Paul explains how Gentiles have been "grafted" into the same vine as the Jews (Rom. 11:17), and how God "brought Jews and Gentiles together as though we were only one person . . . when he united us in peace . . . by uniting Jews and Gentiles in one body" (Eph. 2:15–16). The Church is even likened to the union of male and female when forming a marriage (Eph. 5:22–32).

God is a champion for merging—bringing diverse people together into a beautiful mosaic that reflects what heaven will look like on earth. Don't verbs like *grafting*, *reconciling*, *uniting*, and *marry* all convey the idea of merging? Jews and Gentiles, men and women, rich and poor, slave or free, traditional

and contemporary, old and young, denominational and nondenominational—all are invited to join, *to merge* with his family on earth and demonstrate the power of the gospel to transform lives and to break down the walls that divide us.

We affirm that healthy churches reproduce and multiply. That's why we consult and write books on church planting and multisite ministry. We need more life-giving churches, not fewer.

We are not saying that every church should merge with another church but we are advocating that every church ought to consider merging if it would better fulfill the biblically driven mission of your church and better extend God's kingdom in your community. Merging is congruent with the heart of God, the principles of Scripture, and the ideal of more effectively using the resources God has provided.

As one pastor in Atlanta told us, "The word *partnership* has changed the life of our church. The Bible tells how Peter caught so many fish that his boat was about to sink. He called over another boat and they partnered together to capture all the blessing God was giving them. That's what happened as we came together to make a difference in this community." In his case, it was a cross-cultural partnership as his growing, predominantly African American congregation joined forces with a declining predominantly white congregation. The importance of bringing another boat alongside finds expression through many different values across Scripture, as summarized in Table 1.1.

Mergers as a Strategy for Change

Wherever churches have existed for more than a few decades, there is a potential for healthy and fruitful church mergers. Jesus said, "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). Jesus is building his church, a *prevailing* church at that. His desire for his bride is that she be healthy, unified, collaborative, and effective. All local churches—the strong, the stable, the stuck, and the struggling ones—are churches that Jesus loves.

**Table 1.1 Biblical Value of Churches Being
“Better Together” Through a Merger**

<i>Churches merge so that they can be more . . .</i>	
Unified	<p>“May they be brought to complete <i>unity</i> to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them . . .” (John 17:23, emphasis added).</p> <p>“There is <i>one body</i> and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope . . .” (Eph. 4:4, emphasis added).</p>
Purposeful	<p>“Being like-minded . . . <i>being one in spirit and purpose</i>” (Phil. 2:2, emphasis added).</p>
Collaborative	<p>Paul views each city’s church as one body, such as “Paul . . . to the church of God in Corinth” (I Cor. 1:2) and “To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thes. 1:1).</p>
Harmonious	<p>“How good and pleasant it is when brothers <i>live together in unity</i>” (Ps. 133:1, emphasis added).</p> <p>“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, <i>live at peace</i> with everyone” (Rom. 12:18, emphasis added).</p>
Stronger	<p>“Two are better than one, because they have a <i>good return</i> for their work” (Eccles. 4:9, emphasis added).</p>
Effective	<p>“Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the <i>common good</i>” (1 Cor 12:7, emphasis added).</p>
Fruitful	<p>“This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples” (John 15:8).</p>
Externally focused	<p>“Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you” (Jer. 29:7).</p>
Healthy	<p>“But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it . . . to prepare God’s people for works of service, to that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and knowledge of the Son of God and become mature . . .” (Eph. 4:7–13).</p>
Reconciled	<p>“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3).</p> <p>“Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! <i>Strive for full restoration</i>, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you” (I Cor. 13:11, emphasis added).</p>

	“If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. <i>First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift</i> ” (Mt. 5:23–24, emphasis added).
Humble	“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in <i>humility</i> consider each other better than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3, emphasis added). “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, <i>humility</i> , gentleness and patience” (Col. 3:12, emphasis added).
Redemptive	“Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings” (Isa. 58:12).
Like heaven	“After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from <i>every nation, tribe, people and language</i> , standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9, emphasis added).

Wherever your own church falls on that spectrum, we believe it’s worth prayerfully exploring whether your church may be a potential candidate for a church merger as a means of building his church overall and extending his kingdom in new ways in this generation.

Why merge?

- To be better together than each church is individually
- To begin a new church life cycle
- To reach more people for Christ
- To make a greater difference for Christ
- To multiply your church’s impact
- To better serve your local community
- To leverage the legacy and good reputation of the past
- To maximize church facilities
- To be a stronger local church
- To further extend God’s kingdom

For those good things to happen, all parties in the merger have to take a risk—a step of faith with no guarantee of success. The statistics on church mergers are sobering. Mergers can be hard. Many fail. This book does not announce that all mergers now work; rather, it affirms that an increasing number of churches have found a way to make mergers work and with many experiencing amazingly good results.

Are you up to exercising faith? We Americans like contests and shows like *The Biggest Loser* because we like to root against the odds. We love it when the underdog makes it. We're drawn to success stories of people going against the odds and winning.

Many of us likewise believe that we can be the exception, entering marriage with every good hope of a meaningful, life-long relationship, even though we know the reality is that too many marriages don't make it. We take long shots on other dreams—maybe of owning our own business or rising to the top of our field, even though we know that in the final outcome only a few will actually make it.

Challenges are still present for today's mergers, but as Jesus told us, with God all things are possible (see Matt. 19:26). We believe some churches are using mergers to fulfill Christ's great commission (see Matt. 18:19–20) in ways that God is eager to bless. Is that something for you to explore? Is it the “new thing” (Isa. 43:19) that God might want to do for you?

Mergers are not a strategy for maintaining the status quo. They are a strategy for dramatic change. Is a merger possibly in your church's future?

Mergers are not a strategy for maintaining the status quo.

The New Math of Mergers

Arizona pastor Justin Anderson experienced a three-church merger in late 2010 and early 2011. The merger tripled the size of his church and left them all with a new structure, new leadership, and

new name—Redemption Church (www.redemptionaz.com). Though painful at times, Justin insists it was the right pathway to pursue. “We are better together than we were apart,” Justin says. “When it comes to vision, ideas, leadership, resources, and prayer, $1 + 1 + 1 = 10$.”

That’s the new math of mergers. And it had such a positive outcome that a year later, Redemption Church did a fourth merger. And they plan for more in the coming years.

Justin Anderson’s experience with church mergers is only one of many people who report it as a big win. In a Leadership Network survey, one Ohio pastor said, “The question the merger hinged upon for us was this: ‘Could we reach the next two hundred people in our community faster together or separate?’ When both pastors answered ‘together,’ it seemed unfaithful to do anything but merge.” After praying, fasting, discussing with a pastoral coach, and then obtaining highly supportive votes by both congregations and their boards, these two churches from the same denomination merged—one with an attendance of 150 and the other 55.

The survey also asked how the merger went for that church. The pastor of the joining church, who filled out the survey, ranked the experience an 8 out of a possible high of 10, stating, “Our focus was on a greater impact on our community, and we achieved that. Both churches were stronger after the merge than before.” For this merged church, $1 + 1 =$ far more than 2.

As these two churches illustrate, new-math mergers are working across many different church sizes. Premerger attendance at the first Arizona example was two thousand. Premerger attendance at the Ohio merger was 205. But church growth, though an important barometer, is not the primary measure

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of a merger's success. Instead it's whether the merger can better achieve God's call of making disciples of Jesus Christ. In that way the more important measures are changed lives.

Serial Mergers and Merger Churches Networks

National surveys affirm that there is a definite trend since the 1990s toward a greater number of mergers. This is happening among churches of all sizes, with the typical example being in the attendance range of one hundred to two hundred after the merger.⁸

However, large churches are rapidly becoming new players in mergers, especially in multiple mergers. Some are even pursuing a pathway of intentionally adding merger after merger as a way of reaching more people and extending their impact. Most, though, are like Seattle-based Mars Hill Church, where Mark Driscoll is teaching pastor, which opened ten different new campuses between 2001 and 2011 (they refer to each campus as a *church*). Four of those churches were mergers. Mars Hill has a vision of fifty such multisite churches by 2020, a portion of which will come through mergers.

Other very large churches have created large networks of merger churches. Oklahoma-based LifeChurch.tv, where Craig Groeschel is lead pastor (who also wrote the Foreword to this book), offers three levels of how it welcomes other churches to partner with it. The broadest level is called Open, and it makes a wide range of the church's resources available at no cost to anyone who will use it in a noncommercial application to lead people to Christ. The next level is called Network, in which churches connect with LifeChurch.tv through a recurring weekend experience that features free video teaching messages. The most closely aligned level with LifeChurch.tv is called United.⁹ Churches that practice this level of partnership join with LifeChurch.tv in reaching people around the globe. They become a LifeChurch.tv campus. Their pastor becomes a campus

pastor of LifeChurch.tv. By late 2011 the church had fifteen different campuses, five of which came as mergers.

North Point Community Church, a church based in greater Atlanta, where Andy Stanley is senior pastor, does not use the word *merger*. Leaders there prefer instead the term *strategic partners*. Their idea is to share best practices and encourage leadership development.¹⁰ Some local partners may become campuses of North Point, which means they link themselves to the other campuses financially and organizationally. The strategic partners beyond Atlanta are independent congregations who share North Point's philosophy and are licensed to use North Point video sermons and other materials.

For New Life Community Church in Chicago, where Mark Jobe is pastor, six of its first ten campuses were mergers, which they call Restarts. Three were congregations that had been established over one hundred years previously. New Life is now training other churches, especially urban ones, in how the legacy of faith can be powerfully honored and given fresh passion through a Restart.¹¹

Other churches actively solicit merger partners but do so regionally. For example, Eagle Brook Church, led by Bob Merritt, is looking for partners in the greater Minneapolis–Saint Paul area as it seeks to establish a ring of campuses around the entire metroplex.¹² Likewise The Chapel in Grayslake, Illinois, is seeking to build a hub of merger churches around the suburban-rural outer edge of Chicago.

Bay Area Fellowship in Corpus Christi, Texas, where Bil Cornelius is pastor, invites church planters in particular to merge their congregations with Bay Area Fellowship as a way of spurring each other on to greater missional focus.¹³

Granted, megachurches like Mars Hill, North Point, Eagle Brook, The Chapel, and Bay Area Fellowship represent less than 1 percent of North America's churches. Yet the innovations they introduce and popularize often have a ripple effect across churches of all sizes. "One factor in the spread of new

ideas is what *Diffusion of Innovations* author Everett Rogers calls their observability,”¹⁴ says Dave Travis, managing director of Leadership Network and coauthor of *Beyond Megachurch Myths*.¹⁵ “Some people hear an idea, grasp it, internalize it, and immediately start implementing it, but an even greater number of people have to see it first to understand. Once they see the model and its favorable results, they may decide that it has merit and value for them. Larger churches, due to their visibility and influence, often platform new models of ministry, which are then spread and adapted across the social ecosystem of smaller churches.”

Clearly, larger churches are blazing a trail of extending their reach and multiplying their impact through intentional merger strategies that many other churches will follow in the days ahead.

Why Mergers in the Past Often Failed

How are today's mergers different from those of yesteryear? They represent two completely different paradigms that we might call “new math” and “old math” of church mergers. Old math mergers were more survival driven, whereas today's mergers are more mission driven. Also old math mergers worked toward equality between the merging churches where today's focus is on aligning with the stronger church culture.

Old math mergers were more survival driven, whereas today's mergers are more mission driven.

First, the old math of mergers was too often $1 + 1 = 1$. The combination rarely worked to produce a vibrant, healthy, larger, or growing church. As veteran church consultant Lyle Schaller explains, the newly merged church typically shrinks to the approximate size of the larger of the two former congregations because no one has made any effort to alter the congregational culture. Members were more comfortable in the smaller size environment they knew before the merger, so they keep dropping away until the culture goes back to what

it was. As a result, the typical merger of two smaller no-growth churches “has had a spectacularly poor record in attracting new members,” he says.¹⁶ This situation commonly occurs, according to Schaller, even when there’s a good cultural fit between the congregations.

One reason for failure is that the old approach often embodied little more than a goal to survive. It was seen as a way of preserving as much as possible. It was not portrayed as a vehicle that could bring significant change. These “intensive care” mergers of two struggling churches were a last-gasp effort to stay alive but often ended with both going down together, such as in the equation $1 + 1 = 0$.

At best, merging was wrongly perceived as a way of making the church work better. Two struggling churches (or sometimes three) would take what they thought were the best elements from each of them and combine them into a merged congregation.

By contrast, today’s successful mergers tend to be missional in focus with one church embracing the vision and strategy of the other church. The new math has a synergistic effect. The merge represents far more than an action taken to survive. Such churches are motivated by a strong, future-oriented sense of mission and expanded outreach rather than by a desire for institutional survival. They are often preceded by three exploratory questions to determine a merger possibility:

- Could we accomplish more together than separately?
- Would our community be better served?
- Could the kingdom of God be further extended by our merger?

Those questions represent the heart of a mission-driven merger. Though many of today’s merger conversations begin when a struggling congregation acknowledges its precarious circumstance, it is not only motivated by survival but by the dream of a renewed or greater mission.

What can make the difference needed for success? Schaller says, “The critical component is a minister who is an effective transformational leader and possesses the skills, including the essential people skills, necessary to create a new worshipping community with a new congregational culture, a strong future orientation, a new set of operational goals, a new sense of unity and a new approach to winning a new generation of members.”¹⁷

What’s the most practical way for that to happen? The best merger success stories, according to Schaller, tend to be when three congregations—rather than the more common pattern of two—come together to create a new congregation that constructs a new building at a new site under a new name with the strong leadership of a new minister who is comfortable and competent in the role of being the pastor of a middle-sized (or large) congregation.

The best merger success stories, according to Schaller, tend to be when three congregations . . . come together to create a new congregation.

Further, within a few years at least one-half of the governing board is composed of people who have joined since the merger and who want to be part of a large and numerically growing congregation.¹⁸

Indeed, that is happening. As Gary Shockley, executive director for new church starts in the United Methodist Church, told us, “One of the strategies we see working in our denomination is the ‘vital merger’ where two or more churches sell all their assets, relocate, get a church planter assigned to them and begin anew.”

Second, church mergers today are different from those in the past in that at least one of the partners is healthy and vital. Usually the healthy and more vital partner is larger in attendance. Sometimes it’s the same size as the church merging with it. On rare occasions it’s smaller than the church merging with it.

Whatever the size comparison, mergers are rarely a fifty-fifty deal of equals coming together. One church typically takes

the lead role, expanding its culture of growing, replicating, and multiplying. If the merger is successful, far more

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than survival happens for the joining church in the years after the merger. Instead it's a clear gain. The joining church is revitalized as the lead church's healthy momentum continues with evidence of more changed lives, more conversions, more baptisms, and more signs of spiritual vitality.

A Dream of Greater Kingdom Ministry

A Colorado pastor told us how he had become the pastor of a small church that had met in a school for five years without effective growth. "Members were tired of trying to push the boulder up a hill with only limited success in all areas," he said. "They were definitely exhausted by setting up in a school every week for five years."

Elders in the congregation raised the topic of a potential merger, looking for the right circumstances. They found a growing, "unleashing" kind of church in Bear Valley Church and asked their pastor to approach its leaders.

By all counts, the merger went well. The pastor told us,

It was successful because both churches understood there is no such thing as an even-steven merger. One church must assume the other. We helped our folks see that what mattered most wasn't "the church of us" but "the church of Jesus." In other words, we rightfully portrayed this as a way to maximize our Kingdom impact—just the opposite of a corporate take-over. We further helped those in the joining church transition into the larger body by forming a large Sunday adult class, which helped maintain their close fellowship. Eventually most of the new people assimilated into the ministries of the lead church.

The joining church gave away its old facility to another church that is still using it to this day. “We merged because we could accomplish more kingdom ministry together than by remaining separate,” he concluded.

This pastor personally modeled a humility and kingdom mind-set by joining the lead church in an assistant pastor role with only occasional preaching opportunities. Other than wishing he had asked to preach a little more often, he says he has no regrets about the merger.

This is the kind of story we suspect we’ll all hear more about in the years to come.